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TRACES OF EMPEROR-WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

By J. M. POWIS SMITH
University of Chicago

The fact of the deification of rulers in ancient Rome has long been traced back in its origin to the Orient. It was a common practice in early Babylonia and in Assyria. Naram-sin was called the "god of Akkad," and "the mighty god of Akkad." Sacrifices were regularly offered to the statue of Gudea while he was yet living. Hammurabi called himself "full brother of the god Zamama" and also "sungod of Babylon."¹ The excavation of Ashur-naṣir-apal's palace disclosed a statue of the king in relief in full regalia, with a sacrificial altar immediately before him. In like manner, the Pharaohs of Egypt were looked upon as incarnations of Re, the sun-god. Such names as Ramses—offspring of Ra—Thothmes—son of Thoth—reflect this consciousness of the divine character of the kings.² But from the soil of Palestine itself we find abundant witness of the presence of the idea of deified kings. The Tel-el-Amarna letters, written to rulers in Egypt by subordinates in Palestine during the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C., at the very time when at least some of the Hebrew clans were invading Palestine, furnish abundant evidence of the deification of the Pharaoh.

One of the Tel-el-Amarna correspondents addresses the Pharaoh as follows:

To the King, my lord, my god(s), my sun, thus speaks Milkili, thy servant, the dust of thy feet: At the feet of the King, my lord, my god(s), my sun, I prostrate myself seven times and seven times. The word which the

¹ For evidence of the deification of kings in Babylonia and Assyria see *Cuneiform Texts*, IX, 44, col. II, l. 18; Hilprecht, *Earliest Version of the Flood Story*, pp. 24-29; T. G. Pinches, *P.S.B.A.*, XXXVII (1915), 87-95; S. Langdon, on "Babylonian Eschatology" in the Briggs Testimonial Volume (1911), pp. 141-61; Leon Legrain, *Historical Fragments* (*P.B.S.*, Vol. XIII), No. 5 (cf. Plate I); No. 29; and p. 43. Especially worthy of note are the following references: a statue of Tiglath-pileser is mentioned among the statues of the gods (see *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur verschiedenen Inhalts*, p. 42, col. I, l. 12); and in the midst of lists of statues of gods, there are several cases of "statue of the king," with the determinative for "god" preceding the phrase (see *ibid.*, p. 42, col. II, ll. 6, 9, and 21, col. III, l. 6). Cf. Ashur-naṣir-apal's Annals, col. I, l. 98.

² See W. Max Müller, *Orientalistische Literatur-Zeitung*, XII, 1 ff., XV, 305 f.

King, my lord, my god(s), my sun, has transmitted to me, I will carefully heed in behalf of the King, my lord, the sun from the heavens. And may the King, my lord, my god(s), my sun, know that the district of the king, my lord, which is under my protection, is prosperous.

The same titles are applied to the Pharaoh by most of his correspondents; Tagi,¹ Biridija of Megiddo,² Šuwardata,³ Zimridi of Lachish,⁴ and Šubandu⁵ are cases in point.

With the deification of kings in active operation in Babylonia on the east and in Egypt on the southwest, and with the Canaanites, among whom Israel was settled, holding the same attitude toward kings, it would be strange indeed if the Hebrews had altogether escaped the influence of their environment in this one respect, though yielding to it readily enough in practically every other. We ought to expect to find something of this sort on Hebrew soil. Nor are we disappointed in our expectation.

The narrative in II Kings 16:10-18 relates how Ahaz after being aided by Tiglath-pileser went to Damascus to pay homage to the Assyrian King, and saw there an altar, the pattern of which he sent to the chief priest in Jerusalem with orders to reproduce it and place it in the temple. This new altar thereupon displaced the old bronze altar and became the center of the sacrificial cultus in the temple. The probability is, as has been suggested by A. T. Olmstead (*American Historical Review*, XX, 1915, 567), that this new altar represented the enthronement of the Assyrian monarch as a god to be worshiped in the temple of Yahweh. It is a fact that the Assyrian king imposed upon subject peoples the obligation to worship him as god.⁶ It is noteworthy that the changes wrought in the Temple equipment by Ahaz are said to have been made "because of the king of Assyria" (vs. 18). If this Assyrian altar imply sacrifice to Tiglath-pileser, it would bring emperor-worship forcefully and concretely to the attention of the Hebrews, but in such a way as to work against the popularity of the practice rather than for it. Compulsory emperor-worship would not make much headway in Israel.

Naturally enough, it is in connection with the establishment of the monarchy that the evidence for deification of kings appears most

¹ Knudtzon, *Tel-el-Amarna Tafeln*, No. 266.

² No. 243.

³ No. 282.

⁴ No. 243.

⁵ No. 304.

⁶ See note 1 on p. 32.

clearly. In the first place both Saul and David are represented as having been chosen for their high office directly by God. There are two stories of Saul's choice, one making Samuel the agent of the divine will (I Sam. 9:15-17; 10:1); and the other declaring that Saul was chosen by lot from among all the people (I Sam. 10:17-25). Both equally stress the fact of supernatural selection. In the case of David, the same idea finds expression in the story of Samuel going down to Bethlehem to David's home and selecting David as successor to Saul from among a family of eight boys. The divinely commissioned character of the kingship is also attested by the two stories of the rejection of Saul at the hands of Samuel (I Sam. 13:11-14; 15:10-28), and by the story of the choice of Jeroboam I as king by the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh, and later on of Jehu by the prophet Elisha (II Kings 9:1-13).¹

A second straw showing the direction of the wind is the fact that the king was always "anointed." This honor was one that the king shared with the *mašševôth* (sacred pillars), the altar, and the priesthood. This anointing of the sacred pillars and of the altar must be looked upon as having originally meant an offering to the deity whose habitation was thought of as being in the pillar or altar. The anointing of priests and kings would, therefore, at least imply that they were in a very intimate sense representatives of the god; and at the most it would mean that they were in some sense embodiments of the god.² The nature of the connection between the Deity and the anointed king is revealed by I Sam. 16:13, 14. Here we learn that when David was anointed at Bethlehem "the spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon David from that day forward"; while, on the other hand, "the spirit of Yahweh had departed from Saul and an evil spirit from Yahweh terrified him." By the process of anointing, therefore, the king became in like manner as the prophet an embodiment of the spirit of Yahweh.

A third index to the circle of ideas associated with kingship is the fact that when Samuel first met Saul he not only anointed him but

¹ See also Hos. 8:4.

² Other references in the Old Testament to the anointing of kings are as follows: Saul, I Sam. 26:16, 23; David, II Sam. 2:4; 3:39; 4:3; 19:22; 23:1; I Chron. 11:3; Absalom, II Sam. 19:11; Solomon, I Kings 1:39, 45; Jehu, II Kings 9:1-13; Joash of Judah, II Kings 11:12; II Chron. 23:11; and Jehoahaz, II Kings 23:30.

kissed him (I Sam. 10:1). Kissing is not always an act of worship in modern society and probably was not always so in the ancient world. But at times it was. The pilgrims to Mecca kiss the black stone in the *Ka'aba* as an act of worship, the stone being regarded as a symbol of Allah. The subjects of the Assyrian kings expressed their homage and allegiance to them by kissing their feet;¹ and it should be remembered that the Assyrian kings set themselves up as gods. Elijah was assured in his gloom and depression that there were "yet 7,000 in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which has not *kissed* him" (I Kings 19:18). In similar fashion, the prophet Hosea (13:2) derides the worshipers of the calves in northern Israel, pointing out the folly of "men *kissing* calves." Something of the same incongruity attaches to men kissing the pope's toe! The fact that Samuel, when he anointed Saul, also kissed him (I Sam. 10:1), though prior to this meeting Saul was a total stranger to him, calls for some other motive than simple affection; and since it is associated with the act of anointing, it is best accounted for as a recognition of the divine character of the newly created king. If the text be correct in Ps. 2:12, the kissing of the son there urged upon the nations must be equivalent to the worship of the messianic king.²

The fourth trail leading to a true understanding of the early Hebrew notion of kingship is the attitude of David toward the person of his royal enemy, King Saul. When Saul was in his power through having entered a cave in which David and his men were hidden, notwithstanding the fact that his men urged him to slay Saul, David contented himself with simply cutting off a piece of Saul's robe. The narrative goes on to say that "David's heart smote him because he had cut off Saul's skirt. And he said to his men 'Yahweh forbid it me, that I should do this thing unto my lord, Yahweh's anointed, to put forth my hand against him, seeing he is Yahweh's anointed'" (I Sam. 24:4-8; cf. 24:11). Another story tells of a similar occasion

¹ See Sennacherib's *Taylor Prism*, II:57; Esarhaddon, II:39; III:6, 45; III R. 15, col. II, 26.

² Aquila, Symmachus, and Vulgate render here, "worship in purity," evidently reading **קָבַר** and giving "kiss" the meaning of "worship." Duhm in the new edition of his commentary on the Psalms (1922) follows Bertholet in reading **רָגַלְךָ** for **גִּילְךָ**, and Marti, *et al.*, in treating **בָּר** as an abbreviation for **בָּרַךְ**, thus securing the rendering: *Kiss his feet with trembling*, which is an injunction to worship Yahweh.

when Abishai begged David to permit him to slay Saul only to have David reply, "Destroy him not; for who can put forth his hand against Yahweh's anointed and be guiltless? As Yahweh liveth, nay, but Yahweh shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle and be swept away. Yahweh forbid it me, that I should put forth my hand against Yahweh's anointed; but now take, I pray thee, the spear that is at his head, and the cruse of water, and let us go" (I Sam. 26:6-12). The same point of view appears in the story relating the bringing to David of the tidings of the death of Saul and Jonathan. "And David said to the young man that told him: 'Whence art thou?' And he answered: 'I am the son of an Amalekite stranger.' And David said to him: 'How wast thou not afraid to put forth thy hand to destroy Yahweh's anointed?' And David called one of the young men and said: 'Go near and fall upon him.' And he smote him that he died. And David said to him: 'Thy blood be upon thy head; for thy mouth has testified against thee, saying: I have slain Yahweh's anointed.'"¹ These incidents show that there evidently was attributed to the king as such a certain sacrosanct character that separated him sharply from other men.² It may be that the fact that the monarchy was hereditary in the Davidic family for so long a time is in part accounted for by this same semi-divine character of the monarch.³

The fifth and final indication of the nature of the kingship in Israel is furnished by certain associations in which the idea of kingship appears. In Exod. 22:27 we read, "Thou shalt not profane God, nor shalt thou curse a prince among thy people." Here prince and God are put upon the same level. The use of the word for "king" (*melek*) is also significant. In Isa. 30:33, the word "king" is a designation for Yahweh himself. The coming overthrow of Assyria is pictured as a great holocaust which is prepared for Yahweh who will

¹ See II Sam. 19:22 for the same point of view; and I Sam. 26:16, 23.

² Cf. Ps. 105:15 (=I Chron. 16:22) where the sacrosanct character of Israel is impressed upon the peoples by Yahweh in the words,

"Touch not mine anointed,
And do my prophets no harm."

³ Amos 6:1b, as emended by Oettli (*Amos und Hosea*, 1901; see W. R. Harper, *Amos and Hosea*, 1905, p. 142; cf. also Marti, *ad loc.*) comes very near to deification; viz., for **לָהֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים הֵם בְּבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל** read **כְּאֱלֹהִים הֵם בְּבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל** like gods are they in the house of Israel. The following description in vss. 4-6 of the life of the courtiers might very well be intended to suggest the manner of life of the gods; cf. Sellin, *Das Zwölfprophetenbuch* (1922), *ad loc.*

himself kindle the sacrificial fire.¹ Still further the word *melek* appears in the names of two deities; viz., Milcom of Ammon (II Kings 23:13) and Molech (II Kings 23:10). The primary meaning of *melek* is not known, but the fact that it is used as the descriptive title of three gods and also as the designation of the king is suggestive of the category of beings to which the king belongs. The relations between the king and God as suggested in II Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; 45:7; and 89:27, 28, though expressed in figurative language, are easily associated with earlier ideas of the deification of the king. Figurative language is often nothing but earlier naïve modes of thinking continuing in speech long after such thinking is outgrown.

It may not be maintained that we have sufficient evidence to support the proposition that there was a full-fledged deification of the king in early Israel. The most that can be said is that in the text as it now stands we have a pale reflection of the idea of deification. But the question inevitably presents itself as to whether or not the fact that these stories passed through many editorial hands which assiduously removed materials that were offensive to later thought, may be held responsible for the loss of much material that would have presented the matter of deification of kings in a much stronger light.

There were many influences at work in Israel tending toward the elimination of the idea of deified kings. The conduct of many of the kings was anything but godlike and gave rise to increasing dissatisfaction and contempt. The prophets who were regarded as mouth-pieces of Yahweh himself found themselves increasingly in opposition to the monarchs and unhesitatingly denounced them in the name of Yahweh. Revolts, usurpations, and assassinations followed one another in quick succession and did much to obliterate any consciousness of deification. In addition to such influences as these, there was the steady growth toward a monotheism that left no room for other gods than Yahweh anywhere in the universe. These combined forces wrought the complete rout of emperor-worship in any and every form. This victory is explicitly recorded in three records.

¹ Cf. Duhm and Marti who omit the allusion to the king as a gloss; but see Dillmann-Kittel *per contra*. "The king" here is also identified with Moloch by some scholars; but this seems out of place here.

The first is Ezekiel, chapter 27, where the prince of Tyre is thus addressed:

"Because thy heart is lifted up,
And thou sayest, 'I am a god,
I sit in the seat of God,
In the heart of the seas';
Yet thou art man and not God,
Though thou didst set thy heart
as the heart of God."

And so on through vs. 10; cf. Isa. 14:12-15.¹ The second is Psalm 82. There we read:

God stands in the assembly of god(s);
In the midst of gods he judges:
"How long will ye judge unjustly,
And respect the persons of the wicked?
Judge the poor and the fatherless;
Do justice to the afflicted and destitute;
Rescue the poor and the needy;
Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked."
They know not, nor do they understand;
They go about in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are moved.
I said, "You are gods,
And all of you sons of Elyon!
Nevertheless you will die like mere men,
And fall like one of the captains."²

The poet is here speaking of and to the deified emperors of his time and taunting them with their ignorance and mortality. They arrogate to themselves divine honors; but they show human frailty in judgment of moral issues and they will meet with the fate that is common to man. The third record of the same conclusion is furnished by the familiar story of Daniel in the den of lions. Daniel had continued praying to Yahweh after a decree had been issued forbidding

¹ Cf. W. H. Schoff, *The Ship Tyre* (1920) who would make Tyre in Ezekiel a camouflage for Babylon.

² The word אֱלֹהִים is often used of subordinate officers, such as captains, etc., and does not necessarily imply kingship or even royal blood; cf. Gen. 37:36; 40:2; II Sam. 4:2; Judg. 9:30. So here the poet tells these kings that they are in no respect different essentially from the officers under them. Duhm would read אֱלֹהִים, *demons*, and interpret Psalm 87 and also Psalm 58 as directed against the Hasmonean kings of Judah who came perilously near to claiming divine honors for themselves.

prayer to any god but King Darius. And Daniel's loyalty to the only true God is rewarded by a marvelous deliverance and by the glorification of the Jewish God in the eyes of the whole world (Daniel, chapter 6).

The deification of kings was ruled out of the existing order of things by the progress of Jewish thought. But it is interesting and significant to find it returning as an essential element in the organization of the coming kingdom of God. The Messiah is our deified king coming back to earth. The messianic age is but the Golden Age of the past transferred to the future. And the anticipated Paradise on earth is to be not a republic, not a democracy, not a commonwealth of nations, but a kingdom under the control of a Messiah, a king sprung from the gods. The past is to come into its own with a vengeance!